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Citation for published version:

Gleghorn, C 2020, 'Filmic disciples and indigenous knowledges: The pedagogical imperative in *El abrazo de la serpiente* (Ciro Guerra, 2015)', *Diálogo*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 31-45. <https://doi.org/10.1353/dlg.2020.0004>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1353/dlg.2020.0004](https://doi.org/10.1353/dlg.2020.0004)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Diálogo

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**Filmic Disciples and Indigenous Knowledges:
the Pedagogical Imperative in *El abrazo de la serpiente* (Ciro Guerra, 2015)**

To drink yagé is to learn.
Davis 1996: 226.

El conocimiento es de todos.
Karamakate, *El abrazo de la serpiente*.

Filmmaking as/and Indigenous pedagogy

Critical approaches to pedagogy in Indigenous Studies have proved a fertile field of enquiry and crucial sphere of influence, not surprisingly so, as formal schooling has for many Indigenous citizens been one of the most violent forms of coloniality and domination, emblemized in the forced removal of Indigenous children from communities for assimilation purposes. Education programs led by the state or church authorities, and their silencing of Native languages and intimate relationship with catechism throughout Abiayala, as Indigenous activists from (Latin) America know the hemisphere,¹ have meant that Western notions of learning have been violently forced upon Indigenous communities. The overt disavowal of Indigenous histories, cultures, and stories in curricula has also meant that the wider school-going population remains woefully ignorant of the discrimination and distress Indigenous communities suffer, and equally of their vitality, creativity and contribution to national and international politics.

One critical space of learning and un-learning to emerge in this panorama is cinema. The reclaiming of filmmaking as a pedagogical and resistant act crafts ‘scenes of Indigenous instruction’ (Allen 2002: 132) that demonstrate situated listening and cross-generational exchange, summoning the imagination of young audiences. Drawing on Chadwick Allen’s work in Indigenous literary studies (2002), Joanna Hearne (2008) analyses scenes of storytelling in Native US animation films as ‘pedagogical iconographies’ (89), which ‘intervene[s] in the historically assimilationist educational models of institutional schooling

systems' (95). In the context of misleading narratives of Indigenous disappearance, homogeneity or obeisance, the initiatives Hearne examines – episodes from the 1999 series *Stories of the Seventh Fire* and *Raven Tales* (Simon James, 2004-), among other titles – offer reparative approaches in the diegetic staging of children as listeners. In Hearne's words, these 'productions strategically reimag[ine] youth as both film authors and as listening audiences' (106). The importance of rebuilding Native identity and vitality through the filmic *mise-en-scène* of storytelling has a clear social and historical context. Moreover, such works favor the consolidation of Indigenous audiences among their intended publics.

A recent wave of films emerging from Latin America invites us to examine how such a pedagogical imperative operates in the work of non-Indigenous directors also, this time, for adult audiences. Works such as *Ixcánul* (Jayro Bustamante, 2016), *Roma* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2018) and *Pájaros de verano* (Ciro Guerra and Cristina Gallego, 2018) – to cite just a few recent examples – attest to the valency of indigeneity for non-Indigenous filmmakers, who, working far more closely than before with Indigenous actors, consultants, and communities, are generating films for widespread, global consumption. These films too are often expected to 'teach' their audiences something about indigeneity in the twenty-first century, and in languages which deviate from the dominant script of Latin American cinema as Spanish- or Portuguese-language film.

This cinematic turn has taken place largely in parallel to circuits of Indigenous filmmaking across Latin America, though some productions bear the imprint of long-term Indigenous media processes.² They also tend to eclipse Indigenous-authored productions from the region even as they present vital, and oftentimes allied, spaces to expand influence and debate. While collaboration between Indigenous and non-Native filmmaker-producers is common in Latin America, training courses are still largely conducted by *mestizo* and international NGO stakeholders or mediators, pointing to the problematic legacy of an earlier

period of Indigenous engagement with film, when power was kept safely beyond Native reach. Today, this enduring dynamic of non-Indigenous teachers of film (bestowers of knowledge) and Indigenous (receiver) learners is for some felt particularly acutely. As Arhuaco director and photographer Amado Villafañá states: ‘A nosotros los indígenas siempre nos ha tocado aprender de los no indígenas porque ellos nunca quieren aprender de nosotros’ (2013, 138). This perception of the teaching-learning dynamic as a one-way process owes much to stubborn colonialist systems of education and governance, not to mention the enduring patronage systems that financially marginalize Indigenous citizens. If for professionally-trained and internationally-revered Latin American directors securing funding is a challenge, Indigenous filmmakers face many more obstacles to producing their work. In addition to the asymmetric power relations at the level of training, funding agencies will rarely award the same degree of production support for works proposed by Indigenous filmmakers or organizations, often using insufficient experience as justification. Quite simply, the Indigenous film, video and media movement – as articulated by the diverse constellation of filmmakers and organizations affiliated with the transnational, umbrella association Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Cine y Comunicación de los Pueblos Indígenas (CLACPI) – is seldom afforded the same prestige globally. Their aesthetic, methodological and political proposals are repeatedly forced off the grid.³

In this context, the hypervisibility of certain Indigenous themes, languages, and narrative devices in recent Latin American features obliges such productions to barter in regimes of pedagogical value. Indigenous portrayals on film always tend to invoke a pedagogical and anthropological expectation, a legacy of the way film technology was allied with early attempts to record communities through exploration and documentary narratives. Bill Nichols has written of the ways in which documentary stimulates ‘epistophilia’ or a ‘desire to know,’ conveying an ‘informing logic, a persuasive rhetoric, or a moving poetics

that promises information and knowledge, insight and awareness' (2001: 40). More specifically, Jean Franco also notes a model of explanation in Indigenous representation, expressed through a collection of recording practices designed by missionaries, adventurers and ethnologists to make Indigenous cultures interpretable (and commodifiable) the world around (1991: 12). This dual expectation – of instruction and explanation – continues to shape appraisals of Indigenous representation on film, even in the realm of fiction.

This article considers how the Colombian feature *El abrazo de la serpiente* (Ciro Guerra, 2015), though not oriented towards children, warrants scrutiny in relation to its presentation of 'scenes' and economies of learning. Drawing on formal film analysis but also on paratextual sources – the press kit, interviews, script and indeed other scholars' published analyses of the film – I argue that the relationships modeled in and across *El abrazo* structure forms of tutelage which inform the audience's approach to 'learning'. My discussion of the cinematic 'scene of instruction' demonstrates that the screened teacher-student, elder-younger and shaman-disciple relationships might be understood as a cipher for spectatorial politics.

El abrazo de la serpiente

Since his first film *La sombra del caminante* (2004), Ciro Guerra has been one of a group of filmmakers associated with an emerging New Colombian Cinema, prompted by the 2003 Cinema Law. All four of Guerra's feature films to date – *La sombra del caminante*, *Los viajes del viento* (2009), *El abrazo de la serpiente*, and recently *Pájaros de verano* (co-directed with Cristina Gallego, 2018) – explore different narratives embedded in Colombia's diverse regions and cultures. *El abrazo* was the first Colombian feature to be nominated for Best Foreign Picture in the Academy Awards, and in 2019, *Pájaros de verano* followed suit, though it did not make the final list of contenders. The 'usual suspects' (Shaw 2016) of Latin American film co-production were involved in financing *El abrazo*: Ibermedia, the Dutch

Hubert Bals Fund, the Argentine National Film Institute INCAA, the Colombian Caracol Televisión and the Venezuelan Nortesur Producciones, among others. Despite this far-reaching support, it took many years for the film to become financially viable and the production was forced to scale-down its initial budget substantially (Rocha 2018: 129). The use of international co-production funding, concerned with securing returns and healthy spectator numbers, in addition to the director's own interest in recovering marginalized rural spaces in the national Colombian imaginary, may go some way to explaining why, in terms of spectatorial politics, the film brings Indigenous cultures closer to Western audiences.

This narrowing of the differences between Indigenous knowledge and Western sources may illuminate why so many critics and commentators discern in *El abrazo* a pedagogical use for Colombian and international audiences alike. Mutis's (2018) appraisal uses a lexicon of redemption with the verbs *transformar* (30), *conscientizar* (31), *corregir* (34), and *reparar* (35), emphasizing the film's emancipatory value. The same pedagogical impetus, this time viewed in somewhat negative terms, was also gauged in Pedro Adrián Zuluaga's review (2015) of the film: 'El mito también es una pedagogía y parece claro, no solo en la película sino en las entrevistas y en su posición frente a la obra, que Ciro Guerra quiere ser un pedagogo y que habla desde ese lugar' (2015). Finally, Felipe Martínez Pinzón's review (2016) of the film asserts that 'La película es una radical crítica a las pedagogías civilizatorias: formas violentas de aprendizaje que tratan de imponer la imitación como regla y la asimilación a Occidente como destino'. To a large degree, this pedagogical value emerges from the film's resignification and potential critique of the various source texts and illustrations used to elaborate the script.

El abrazo draws on the accounts of two real-life male explorers, the German ethnographer Theodor Koch-Grünberg and the ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes, from the US. The film begins in 1940, when botanist Evan (Brionne Davis), visits an elderly and

solitary shaman, Karamakate (Tiapuyama-Antonio Bolívar Salvador) to seek guidance in his botanical pursuits. Karamakate is presumed the last member of the Cohiuano, a fictitious tribe, though one which acts as surrogate for other experiences of forced isolation in the region. After an initial exchange, Karamakate agrees to help Evan find the potent hallucinogenic and fictionalized flower *yakruna*, though he informs the explorer that he is but a shadow of his former self, a *chullachaki*, as he can no longer remember many important cultural practices of his people. The film's narrative then develops along two parallel journeys, skillfully united through the ebb and flow of the river's time: the first, an earlier encounter the young Karamakate (Nilbio Torres) had with the fictional character Theodor von Martius (Jan Bijvoet), who sought the elusive *yakruna* flower to cure his illness circa 1909, and the second, the present-day quest to locate it for Evan. In this second narrative thread, the search for the *yakruna* is used as a ruse to mask Evan's real interest: to source and exploit high-grade rubber, which thrives near *yakruna*, for use in the World War II efforts at home. Divergent values are thus attributed to the sacred flower, with Theodor and Evan both emphasizing instrumental gains in locating the commodity in contrast to Karamakate's own endeavors to recover identity and pass on his knowledge.

Several other sources are cited as intertexts for the film. *Zwei Jahre unter den Indianern* ([Two Years Among the Indians] Koch-Grünberg, 1910) features as metacommentary in the film narrative, and the films *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979), *Aguirre, Wrath of God* (Herzog, 1972) and *Fitzcarraldo* (Herzog, 1982) all share some characteristics with the dark side of modernity presented in *El abrazo*. Mauricio Rivera (2018) offers a close-reading of literary and historical references in Guerra's film, focusing on the ways in which it facilitates an engagement with the extractive violence of the rubber industry. *El abrazo* does not shy away from denouncing the disastrous effects of rubber-tapping in the Western Amazon, which was, by the late nineteenth century, wreaking death,

torture, slavery and destruction throughout the region. In the film's reworking of writings of the nation through the *selva*, Rivera also locates the work concretely in a Colombian literary context, making comparisons to *La vorágine* (José Eustasio Rivera, 1924) and *Toá* (César Uribe Piedrahita, 1935). Indeed, the national context looms large over the production and is self-consciously woven into the script at several moments. References to 'los colombianos' and their destructive influence are common, including a presidential commemorative plaque at the site of La Chorrera to acknowledge the 'civilizing' work the Colombian rubber pioneers undertook. Karamakate and the rest of the group are also repeatedly asked if they are Colombian – when they hesitate to respond, the interrogator persists: '¿...que si son colombianos?'. This underscoring of the Colombian nation-state in the lives of the protagonists, despite the film's frontier setting, emphasizes the film's appeal to a Colombian cinematic particularity.

El abrazo de la serpiente emerged at a time when attention to ethnobotany and exploration in the Amazon was already heightened following the publication in Colombia of *One River: Explorations and Discoveries in the Amazon Rainforest* (1996), written by Richard Evans Schultes's own student-disciple, Wade Davis. This translation by Colombian poet and author Nicolás Suescún Peña has seen multiple editions in Colombia and widespread praise since its first edition in 2001. Theodor Koch-Grünberg's travel journals were also translated and published in Colombia in the mid-1990s, exemplifying the 'repatriation' of knowledge which takes place at national, seldom local, level. In film, *El abrazo* is one of a cluster of recent productions to put the spotlight on the Amazon region. The feature documentary *Apaporis: secretos de la selva* [Apaporis: In Search of One River] (Antonio Dorado, 2013) likewise drew on Wade Davis's *One River* as inspiration, as the English title reflects.⁴ Finally, the Colombian supermarket chain Éxito and other private funding sources commissioned Mike Slee, a British director, to make a visually polished and

highly commodifiable version of the landscapes of the region in *Magia salvaje* (2015). The titles of these productions corroborate the idea that the Amazon region remains an elusive and distant place, unknown to the majority of Colombians, let alone global audiences. *El abrazo*'s own recourse to mythologies of magic, timelessness, a lost world and co-dependency on limited knowledge of the region and its diverse cultures suggests that the film never really sought to reach Indigenous audiences, even if screenings were organized in the communities where the film was shot. Instead, the film and its associated sources explicitly orient its pedagogical imperative towards non-Indigenous publics.

The film ushers in the sounds of the *selva* with a quotation attributed to Theodor von Martius, the fictionalized explorer of the film:

No me es posible saber si ya la infinita selva ha iniciado en mí el proceso que ha llevado a tantos otros a la locura total e irremediable. Si es el caso, me queda disculparme y pedir tu comprensión, ya que el despliegue que presencié durante esas encantadas horas fue tal que me parece imposible describirlo en un lenguaje que haga entender a otros su belleza y esplendor; solo sé que cuando regresé, ya me había convertido en otro hombre.

The epilogue is in fact an almost literal quotation from one of Theodor Koch-Grünberg's entries in the aforementioned travel journal, *Zwei Jahre unter den Indianern*, though in the film the character's surname makes clear reference to another German explorer of the region, Karl Friedrich Philipp von Martius. According to Maria Chiara d'Argenio, 'In reformulating Koch-Grünberg's statements on the difficulty to describe the "infinite jungle", von Martius's words re-enact the linguistic impossibility, or sense of ineffability, mentioned ever since the earliest European encounters with the Americas' (2018: 36). Attributing these words to the hybridized character points to the layers of signification in apprehending the Amazon and to the film's status as fiction. It also interpellates the audience with the vocative 'tu', in this case inviting spectators to evaluate the film's rendering of the Amazon. This

caveat, then, channels a dual function, locating the film firmly in relation to antecedent (and persistent) discourses of the Amazon mobilized through the source texts, and simultaneously appealing to the audience's judgment as regards the efficacy of the cinematic language employed to provoke awe.

In contrast to the stereotype of the Amazon as excessively green and exuberant, the rich texture produced in 35mm black and white photography invites the spectator to actively imagine the territory portrayed on screen. Three different reasons are provided by the crew regarding the decision to film in black and white. The most common justification refers to the fact that the explorers' sources included photographs in black and white and thus the film sought to recreate this visual texture. Second, the use of black and white invokes a world lost (David Gallego, cited in Mutis 2018: 31) – in the director's words 'un Amazonas que ya no existe' (Guerra, Ibermedia) – conferring an elegiac tone to the narrative. The black and white photography also reflects *El abrazo*'s avoidance of particularity in its efforts to emphasize a fictional reimagining of Amazonian Indigenous cultures. In rendering humans, plants, and animals in the same tonalities, the black and white photography was designed to activate the imagination of the audience, inviting them to conjure the colors mentally. In this sense, as Rueda (2017) observes 'Podríamos agregar entonces que el blanco y negro es otro de los recursos por los cuales la producción invita la interpretación y la polémica'. The use of the epigraph and black and white photography from the beginning present as a strategy to activate the spectator's imagination. Concomitantly, the photography also enables a certain levelling of the difference between distinctive sentient beings in the Amazon, congruent with the film's overarching attempt to present multiple optics on the thorny negotiations of the contact zone.

The Myth of Pedagogy

El abrazo foregrounds the exploration and exploitation of Amazonian botanical resources in ways which implicitly call attention to the cultural and moral ramifications of knowledge-transfer. For Mutis, the complex constellation of sources used in *El abrazo* furnishes the film with what she terms its ‘andamiaje metaficticio’ (2018). Mutis’s framing of this extreme self-referentiality as a form of scaffolding, or *andamiaje*, is anchored in concepts derived from theories of learning and pedagogy. According to her argument, the collapsing of the real and the fictitious at various moments in the film evinces a concern for reflexivity which corroborates the film’s fabrication as a source. This continuous transitioning between references drawn from the explorers’ texts, drawings and photographs, and the fiction, point to the need for the spectator to interrogate the value of the film, and indeed of any source, as a transparent and reliable document.

In interviews, Guerra and other crew members have repeatedly emphasized that *El abrazo* is not a strict transposition of the journeys of these explorers and their quests for botanical knowledge but rather a fictional adaptation which uses their texts, illustrations and photographs as inspiration. The film’s critique of colonialism, of extractive forms of science, and of the heretofore neglected perspective of Indigenous cultures in such processes is conveyed through an act of translation. Zuluaga (2015), d’Argenio (2018) and Mutis (2018) all refer to the work as a form of cultural translation, and to the use of explicit decoding for the audience in the dialogue. According to d’Argenio, Karamakate’s ‘linguistic operation can be understood as an act of translation: he renders the non-verbal signs of the jungle into verbal signs; moreover, these are communicated to the Westerner as a condition of granting the latter access to the native world’ (2018: 137). This relationship, whereby the audience witnesses Karamakate verbalize knowledge to Theo/Evan, acts as a metaphor for the experience of the spectator as s/he interprets the film.

Guerra also referred to the need to craft an aesthetic and narrative that was comprehensible for Western audiences:

Es muy difícil para Occidente entender y acercarse a la manera de ver el mundo de esas culturas, y con la ficción eso se traduce. Si uno hiciera una película basándose fielmente en una cosmogonía indígena la película sería tal vez incomprensible, y sería una locura, sería surreal. (Guerra, *Ibermedia*)

This orientation towards Western audiences is also made apparent in the published script.

The convention of a Director's Note, used to communicate the core motivation and reach of the film, is normally included in a project proposal seeking funding. In this regard, it should not be taken as a mirror of what actually took place during the production's making.

Notwithstanding, the preface to the script reveals layers of discourse which frame the film according to industrial parameters deemed incompatible with Indigenous particularity: the novelty of *El abrazo*'s perspective, its uniqueness, its suitability for Western audiences enamored with fantasies of exploration and the noble savage. I here reproduce the statement in full:

Siempre que miraba el mapa de mi país, veía una gran incógnita. Casi la mitad de él estaba cubierto por un territorio oculto, por un manto verde, del que nada sabía. Es el Amazonas, tierra inabarcable, que hemos reducido a unos pocos conceptos. Coca, droga, ríos, indios, guerra. ¿Realmente no hay nada más allí? ¿No hay una cultura, una historia? ¿No hay un espíritu que trascienda? *Los exploradores me enseñaron que sí. Aquellos hombres que lo dejaron todo, que arriesgaron todo, para mostrarnos un mundo que no podíamos haber imaginado.* Y que hicieron contacto. Ese encuentro se dio en medio de uno de los genocidios más crueles que ha visto la humanidad. ¿Puede el hombre, a través del arte y la ciencia, trascender la brutalidad? Algunos hombres lo hicieron. *Los exploradores han contado su historia. Pero los nativos no. Su historia es ésta.* Un pedazo de tierra del tamaño de un continente, que no se ha contado. Que no existe en el cine de nuestra América. Ese Amazonas ya se ha perdido. Pero en el cine, puede volver a existir. (Guerra [2011], cited in 2017. Italics mine for emphasis)

This statement clearly markets the production as an endorsement of the heroism and fantasies of explorers, and with a stroke of arrogance neglects to acknowledge valuable Indigenous stories, perspectives, and sources on such events. In so doing, Guerra suggests that the film – at the time yet-to-be-realized – will speak for Indigenous cultures and reverse the violence enacted upon Amazonian territory.⁵ The privileged perspective the film promises is dramatized through scenes of cross-cultural learning.

Scenes of instruction

The economy of knowledge represented in *El abrazo*, though seemingly cognizant of the particular process of knowledge-transferal emblemized through shaman teaching, presents in explicit terms a claim for universality. Native guide Manduca (Yauenkü Miguee) berates Theo for depriving the Indigenous community of a compass on the grounds that the object is alien to them and will contaminate their culture. Karamakate's riposte asserts that 'el conocimiento es de todos', suggesting that all aspects of cultural knowledge should be shared evenly with other peoples. Material culture in the form of botanical illustrations, compasses, gramophones, cameras, and the watch connect the earlier and later journeys throughout the film and meditate upon different interpretations of technology, its uses and abuses in the Amazon. The photograph and the gramophone present multiple acts of cultural interpretation that 'undermine[s] the "primitiveness" of the native and deconstruct[s] the colonialist belief in the superiority of Western technology/modernity' (d'Argenio 2018: 139). This statement also authorizes the explorers' extraction of Karamakate's knowledge. During the scene where the younger Karamakate and Manduca argue as to the value, or futility, of finding the *yakruna* for Theo, Manduca foreshadows the troubling *dénouement* of the film: 'If we can't get the whites to learn it will be the end of everything'. Indeed, the tutelage which takes place in *El abrazo* is in the most part centered on Native to non-Native transfer and vice versa, with just one scene modelling Indigenous-to-Indigenous exchange.

This scene occurs when Karamakate, Theo and Manduca are at the Capuchin mission, the indubitable site of institutionalization for Indigenous children, situated on the old rubber station of La Chorrera. Young Karamakate's disgust at their instruction in Spanish and the Gospel – which, the film reveals, he too suffered – prompts him to gather several of the boys together for a clandestine storytelling moment. Pictured in a circle by firelight, the children's faces reveal their intent listening as Karamakate tells the story of the botanical knowledge of the *chiricaspi*, a gift to the Cohuiano, and implores them to preserve their people's song. Aurality, the art of listening, is a central trope in the film – 'Usted no sabe escuchar', says Karamakate to Evan – and a skill the shaman seeks to transmit to the explorers. Yet Karamakate's plea to the children at the Mission is left unanswered at the film's close; the *payé* passes on the Cohuiano song to Evan, realizing that 'mediante la transmisión de sus conocimientos al hombre blanco, éste podrá entender la importancia del Amazonas y de su gente, y así evitar su destrucción' (Mutis 2018: 38). The film's disappearance of Karamakate immediately after he has successfully shared his knowledge of the *yakruna* suggests that were it not for the felicitous arrival of the white man Evan – more knowledgeable about Cohuiano culture than he – his people's song would be destined to die. The Indigenous scene of instruction at the mission therefore foreshadows the fatalistic death of a culture even as it imprints a spirit of rebellion upon the overly-determined space of forced assimilation. **[Insert Figure 1: Children at the mission listen attentively to Karamakate's story.]**

At several key moments in the narrative, however, the film confers agency to Karamakate by positioning the camera's gaze from his perspective. The arrival of both Theo and Evan is sensed from the river and its bank, from where Karamakate, in his younger and older incarnations, watches. Here the spectator is initiated into the protagonist's perspective through over the shoulder shots in a shot-reverse shot structure which offers first Karamakate's perspective before revealing the perspective of the foreigners' canoes. This sequence of shots

not only establishes the parallel stories, subsequently mirroring the structure in Evan's arrival scene, but also inaugurates a call and response which emphasizes cultural exchange on Karamakate's terms. It is noticeable in these transactions that there are moments of 'epistemic privilege' (d'Argenio 2018: 136) and of vulnerability for both Karamakate and Theo/Evan. Early on, the older Karamakate asks Evan to prepare *mambé*, coca-leaf paste, on his behalf as he no longer recalls the technique. In fact, in the guise of a *chullachaki* Karamakate is as much disciple as guide in their journey to find the *yakruna*. This level footing is forged through a balanced and parallel *mise-en-scène*. Several scenes present Karamakate and the explorer (either Theo or Evan) in inverted stagings, switching from left to right, and suggesting their interchangeability. The conflict wrought of the contact zone is here orchestrated in a dialogic portrayal emphasizing 'la porosidad del intercambio' (Rueda 2017) and calling equal attention to Western *and* Indigenous bodies of cultural and scientific knowledge. **[Insert Figure 2: Dialogic deciphering of the travel journals]**

The most compelling 'scene of instruction' operates through magisterial parallel editing over approximately twenty minutes, during which Karamakate appears both to instruct Theo (to no avail) in the power of dreaming in the earlier plotline and Evan in the later one. This is achieved through Karamakate's wistful conjuring of his younger self's frustrations with Theo on the opposite bank of the river. A reverse shot from the river reveals Karamakate at the center of the axis of this shared cinematic space-time; the use of depth of field here depicts Evan in the background of the near side, Karamakate in the center and Theo on the opposite bank. This extended *caapi* sequence highlights how the shaman-teacher appears as a long-suffering and occasionally reluctant repository of information for white men who cannot comprehend how a dream – the hallucinatory state induced by consumption of the *yakruna* flower – might represent a legitimate source of knowledge. The explorers' frustration at being unable to 'dream' – achieve knowledge, according to the visions triggered

by plant science – is met with Karamakate’s insistence that in order to dream, they must not be afraid to believe. Theo’s eagerness to use plant medicine and cure his illness fails to honor the patience and prohibitions necessary to consume *caapi*. For his own part, Evan’s self-identification as a man of science inhibits him from believing in the knowledge revealed through *caapi*. **[Insert Figure 3: ‘Theo’s dream and the Creation’]**

In order to persuade Evan of the power of storytelling, Karamakate makes comparison with a cherished cultural reference of the botanist. The use of Haydn’s *Creation* as a bridging device to momentarily unite the dreaming sequences of Theo and Evan explicitly acknowledges the tension between different forms of knowledge and learning. Though Evan finds the music beautiful, for him, it is just a story. Karamakate on the other hand uses the analogy to make their different forms of knowledge conversant. As Karamakate instructs Evan as to the significance of *caapi* as a rite of passage for Cohuiano men, Theo’s own experience as a ‘vagabond of dreams’ (Karamakate, *El abrazo*) replays before his eyes. The rapprochement of varied vehicles of knowledge – music, story, dream – reconciles the ‘rational’ Western world and the Indigenous world of dreams. Evan’s realization of the location of the *yakruna* flower emerges as a result of his own learning process and experience; the process is depicted as Karamakate’s unlocking of the possibility to dream for Evan. Evan thus improves upon Theo’s earlier *caapi* experience, which would ultimately spell the end of Theo’s storyline in the film.

Universalizing the song

Evan’s *sueño iniciático* at the close of *El abrazo* is both literal and figurative as it forms the basis for the acquisition of knowledge through experience. This sequence stands out in the film for its use of vivid color. Given that Schultes famously accompanied Beat author William Burroughs to the Apaporis region in the Colombian Amazon in the 1940s, this nod

to psychedelic representational modes is not out-of-step with the cultural histories the film invokes. The butterflies that enshroud Karamakate and, subsequent to his *yakruna* dream, Evan also, emblemize the transferal of knowledge that takes place from *payé* to US-explorer.⁶ This transferal of knowledge, enabled by filmic codes, to some degree suggests that all cosmological, sacred knowledge is up for grabs.

Tensions regarding the acquisition and recording of sacred knowledge, here related to unpicking the significance of the dream the *yakruna* flower induces, of course loom large over the history of Indigenous representation throughout Latin America, as elsewhere. Not only has botanical knowledge been key to pharmaceutical developments in the Western world, but creation stories themselves have been misappropriated, distorted and repackaged according to the assimilationist needs of the time. For Guerra, fiction represented a convenient way to displace anxieties regarding the authenticity of Indigenous concepts used in the film (Guerra, *Ibermedia*). In this regard, the universalization of knowledge in *El abrazo* facilitates the deracination of stories, myths, plants and peoples – not to mention the Cohiuano song itself – from their particular source communities.

Myriad Indigenous and botanical terms are interwoven through the script, drawn from a variety of cultures, though according to d'Argenio 'no real names of plants or other earth-beings considered sacred by native communities are employed in the film' (2018: 139). The most important concept in terms of the plot is of course the *chullachaki*, a Quechua word used by the Machiguenga, which denotes a void, or empty human double.⁷ A fuller explanation of this term appears in the scene when Theo shows younger Karamakate his photograph; the latter interprets the image before him as his *chullachaki*.⁸ The *chullachaki* metaphor is also what prompts Karamakate to embark on his own journey of redemption as he leads Evan through the Amazon on his quest to secure a future for Cohiuano knowledge. This journey of 'redemption' reconciles Karamakate with his younger, and more complete,

self, as depicted in the opening of the psychedelic trip sequence. In *El abrazo* this reconciliation creates a neat mirroring between Karamakate's younger and elder selves, and Karamakate's interpretation of Evan as a *chullachaki* of Theodor.

Yet the *chullachaki* also permits Karamakate to conceal sacred knowledge from Evan. The premise that the older Karamakate has 'forgotten' who he is, the traditions of his people, and how to reach the site where the *yakruna* might be found, is constantly questioned in the logic of the film's narrative. Approximately one hour into the film he suggests to Evan that he may no longer be a *chullachaki*, to moments later say that he remains one but is gradually recovering his memory. The *chullachaki*, far from being a metonym for the loss of an 'authentic' indigeneity and for the 'madness' of living in isolation, confers substantial power to the character of Karamakate as he controls the transferal of knowledge. The *chullachaki* thus acts as a narrative conceit and weapon which buys Karamakate the time to discern whether Evan can indeed be trusted in the pursuit of the *yakruna* flower. The older Karamakate's visible concern at the fact that Evan deciphers his petroglyphic writing towards the beginning of the film supports this interpretation. In fact, the published script of the film reveals that Evan's decoding was always intended to be a worrying revelation:

Karamakate constata con preocupación que Evan está deduciendo los mensajes inscritos en la piedra. [...]

EVAN (CONT'D)

Es el Taller de los dioses, el Chiribiquete. Allá es donde existe la yakruna.

Evan observa a Karamakate como si él tuviera la respuesta a una adivinanza. Pero éste sólo lo mira en silencio, con preocupación.

The cunning of Karamakate is that he uses the *chullachaki* to disguise or protect the persistence of his knowledge.

This same effort to disguise concepts and knowledge is used in the many Indigenous words that pepper the script. Take *watoima*, a meteor or fire-spirit, (*Banisteria*-)*caapi*, the botanical name for *yagé* or *ayahuasca*, the multiple references to different Amazonian Indigenous groups (Yukuna, Tukano, Wanano, Koeu), *ayúmpari* a variant of *ayómpari*, ordinarily used for friend or trading partner – the list could go on. In relation to botanical references and the names of plants, though the *yakruna* itself is ‘fictitious’ it is a barely veiled reference to the *chacrana* roots used in the preparation of *yagé* and other references to *caapi* and *chiricaspi* make it patently clear that these plants belong to the same semantic crop. It is, therefore, somewhat disingenuous to believe that *El abrazo* does not trade on the fame of the region’s shamanic tourism and hallucinogenic commodities.

The director’s candid acknowledgment of this heterogeneous mixture demonstrates his awareness of the kind of long-term, durational collaborations a more ‘anchored’ cultural mooring might require. Regarding the selective approach to Indigenous cultures and their fictionalization, Guerra remarked

Empecé tratando de pegarme a una u otra visión de mundo, pero no tengo el derecho a hacer eso, no tengo el permiso para hacerlo, porque son conocimientos infinitos. Para poder hablar fielmente de ellos tendría que vivir allá mucho tiempo. Me parecía, entonces, irrespetuoso. (Guerra, *Ibermedia*)

In the interviews included as DVD extras, this negotiation of an outsider’s gaze is mitigated through repeated references to the hospitality the *selva* offered cast and crew during filming. The emphasis on the spiritual guidance that the production team’s own *payé* gave acts as an endorsement of the particular kind of intercultural collaboration the film orchestrated. Yet, while there is certainly evidence to suggest that meaningful collaboration and ethical methods were used in the production, the final film’s approach to diverse Indigenous concepts and Amazonian cultures does little to underscore the necessity for a different kind of listening in the West attuned to the threshold of what should, and should not, be known.

Epilogue: The Vanishing Indian

The slippery identification of the multiple references to diverse cosmologies and words from Indigenous cultures of the Amazon contributes to the sensation that Karamakate is but a phantasmagoric presence of cultures past. The film's reflexivity in relation to its nesting and revealing of Western and Indigenous sources, though skillful, problematically forces Karamakate to act out his own disappearance as a result of his fictional creation. The sudden vanishing of Karamakate at the close of the film, and rebirth in the knowledge he transferred to Evan, merely confirms him as an emblem of the mythologized disappearance of Indigenous cultures. In this regard, though there is little doubt that Karamakate often channels the narrative perspective, his knowledge and culture is problematically conducted through Evan in the film's *dénouement*.

The dedication that follows his disappearance underlines the recurrent motif of the vanishing Indian and rehearses violent imperatives of contact: 'Esta película está dedicada a la memoria de los pueblos cuya canción nunca conoceremos'. Like the epigraph at the opening of the film, ventriloquized through the mouth of the fictional explorer Theodor von Martius, the dedication at the film's end invites the audience to identify with the explorers, and with the film's director, in the use of the first-person plural. Here the 'conoceremos' invites the spectator to participate in an imagined community of explorers who have the right – perhaps even the obligation – to seek out and preserve Indigenous knowledges, legitimized in the film's staging of Evan's epistemic inheritance. The dedication at the end of the film emphasizes framing devices which condition the ways in which knowledge is represented. In this way, *El abrazo* extends a final invitation to the spectator to make connections with the present-day situation of Indigenous peoples and embrace the nostalgic tone of disappearance. In d'Argenio's appraisal, the film's deviation from 'the audience's imagery of the

contemporary Amazon' acts as a way to rekindle the possible connections between the narrative, located in the past, and present-day Indigenous realities (2018: 148). However, the intercalated photographic archives and still images of the staged fiction scenes during the credit sequence miss an opportunity to reassert the contemporaneity of Indigenous cultures. The framing device in the epigraph and dedication note at the close direct the film's presumed pedagogical value towards the past, rather than the future.

Conclusion

El abrazo de la serpiente ultimately justifies the explorers' pursuit of knowledge in its insistence that knowledge knows no boundaries. Though Guerra and other crew members repeatedly underscore the ethical processes which governed the production process and draw attention to the fictional status of the film, their recourse to common tropes of indigeneity borne of the colonial archive demonstrates its explicit attempt to perform a redemptive act vis-à-vis Western sources. *El abrazo*'s pedagogical discourse therefore employs framing devices which are consonant with the knowledge-politics the film endorses. The epigraph, the dedication, the metafilmic reinterpretation of the explorers' sources and of course the diegetic scenes of instruction themselves all delineate *El abrazo*'s target audiences, who are crucially not among the many contemporary, surviving Indigenous communities today. In this regard, the film crystallizes a set of presuppositions regarding the value of Indigenous spectatorship.

By foreclosing engagement with Indigenous audiences, the pursuit of knowledge in and through *El abrazo* differs from the kind of pedagogical film work discussed by Hearne. The film mobilizes 'metacommunicative frames' (Hearne 2008: 96) that drive its pedagogical thrust and which are shared with examples of Indigenous filmmaking from across Abiayala, though to quite different ends. The work of the Brazilian NGO Vídeo Nas Aldeias (VNA), for instance, similarly seeks to reach non-Indigenous audiences, though not exclusively so, in

what Vincent Carelli, the organization's founder, has termed 'un cine que parte por la seducción' (2013: 61). Reflexivity is common to many of VNA's productions, principally in the documentary mode, and this reflexivity performs a specific function in relation to the works' pedagogical orientation. Films such as *Marangmotxingmo Mirang*, *Das Crianças Ikpeng Para O Mundo* (Natuyu Yuwipo Txicão, Kumaré Ikpeng, Karané Ikpeng, 2001) and *Prîara Jõ. Depois Do Ovo, A Guerra* (Komoï Panará, 2008) present multiple and differentiated audiences with ideal versions of learning and tutelage which are socially-embedded and which bear testament to dialogic relationships established across the screen. *Marangmotxingmo Mirang* uses the video postcard form to present an epistolary orality which engages younger generations in cross-cultural communication and explores the potentialities of youth perspectives on belonging within and across territorial borders. The powerful sequences which directly address the spectators in this *videocarta* show that Indigenous children are authoritative voices too. In *Prîara Jõ. Depois Do Ovo, A Guerra*, young children reinterpret the historic feud the Panará held with the neighboring Txukarramãe, breathing life into the stories of their ancestors. In their insistence on scenes of instruction within and across the fourth wall, the VNA films bear witness to a revitalized sense of listening culture which serves the next generations by imagining Indigenous producers and audiences, even as they seek to share issues of importance with the wider population.

El abrazo clearly attempts to recover a perspective crucial to understanding the incomplete history of Colombia. However, its championing of universal knowledge and diffuse Indigenous identity produces a pedagogical discourse which neglects to recognize that inequality in knowledge can be transformative; acknowledging what we do not know – and indeed need never know – is an important part of the recognition of difference. Moreover, where community-oriented Indigenous films clearly relate to future-oriented social and

cultural contexts of reception, *El abrazo de la serpiente* assumes that its audiences will never be comprised of knowing Indigenous spectators, and guards against critiques by citing extensive anthropological research and the prerogative to fictionalize and unmoor specific Indigenous signifiers. Paradoxically, this replicates the same attitude used to approximate Latin American cultures on film in the past, particularly during the Good Neighbor Policy era. Sérgio Augusto's famous description of Hollywood's approach to Brazil as 'smelling more of *chili con carne* than *feijoada*' (1995: 356) chimes with *El abrazo*'s act of amalgamation that blends diverse linguistic, musical, narrative and spiritual codes to produce a version of indigeneity, and of Indigenous knowledge politics, designed to satiate national and international appetites, but which is of little substance in the Amazon.

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¹ Abiyala is a Guna word which describes the Western Hemisphere. Though it is sometimes used as a synonym for Latin America, it in fact proposes an alternative hemispheric mapping which militates against Anglo-European imaginaries of the area. I follow the new spelling of Abiyala as endorsed by local Guna processes of orthographic standardization. The term also commonly circulates as Abya Yala.

² For instance, the narrative structure of *Pájaros de verano* is channeled through the lyrical storytelling of a Wayúu *jayeichi*, and the established Wayúu filmmaker Leiqui Uriana was responsible for the production during filming in La Guajira.

³ The reasons for this are of course manifold, including divergent political and ideological perspectives on the work of films and their suitability for mass markets. As Salazar and Córdova note (2008), the categories the CLACPI use to make awards at their biennial international film festival often place community efforts centre-stage, acknowledging the important work this film and media movement undertakes in disseminating more complex and nuanced representations of Indigenous lives. The pedagogical value of film and its process is understood in terms of its contribution to community cohesion, debate, and, of course, its ability to craft narratives of Indigenous effervescence. I do not want to understate the significance of the participation of the works in the CLACPI international film festivals and other prestige events such as *Imaginative* in Toronto and more recently, the Mother Tongue Film Festival in Washington DC. I merely aim to show how though Indigenous filmmaking and Latin American film have moments of cross-pollination, their audiences and markets to a large extent follow different political projects.

⁴ In this feature documentary, Wade Davis even provides the English voiceover narration.

⁵ The process of the film also undoubtedly transformed the director and crew's perception of their work through paratextual sources tend to replicate the same exoticizing logic of the pre-production funding-oriented discourse.

⁶ They might also pay homage to the *mariposas amarillas* of García-Márquez's invention, the butterflies that incessantly signaled the presence of Mauricio Babilonia, who, like Karamakate 'Murió de viejo en la soledad, sin un quejido, sin una protesta, sin una sola tentativa de infidencia, atormentado por los recuerdos y por las mariposas amarillas que no le concedieron un instante de paz, y públicamente repudiado como ladrón de gallinas'. Given that the filming took place the year after García Márquez died, now monumentalized in public memory by the visual metaphor of yellow butterflies – this fortuitous allusion may be a prime example of spectator interference.

⁷ A further intertextual reference could be made with Mario Vargas Llosa's own eclectic use of Machiguenga terms, cosmology and narrative devices in *El hablador* (1981). See Sá 1998, for a compelling and persuasive critique of the novel.

⁸ Here, the reference to an empty soul also resonates with the often-cited interpretations of photography as a technology which robs humans of their souls.